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ABSTRACT

Education programs for 4-year-olds may offer unique opportunities for the growth of services for young children. Currently, the role of state departments of education in preschool instruction is evolving; no single approach to public school programming for 4-year-olds exists. Approximately two-thirds of the 28 state and District of Columbia early childhood education programs are intended to serve children at risk for school failure. To provide children with free opportunities to get off to a better start, in 1988-89 the Little Rock School District in Arkansas implemented five programs for 4-year-olds within their public school system. In 1989-90, 9 more classes, for a total of 13 programs, were added. Additional opportunities for early childhood education exist in the state through private day care facilities and through the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters. Public school programs for 4-year-olds should be quite different from some of today's public school kindergartens. Developmentally appropriate early childhood education programs must be based upon knowledge obtained from child development research, employ only those professionally trained to guide the intellectual growth of young children, and focus on the needs and characteristics of 4-year-olds and their families. (17 references) (KM)

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Changes in Early Childhood:
Public School Programs for 4-Year-Olds

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Changes in Early Childhood:

Public School Programs for 4-Year-Olds

Kindergarten was introduced in the United States approximately 130 years ago. Today, kindergartens are "the rule" rather than "the exception." Although kindergartens are primarily for 5-year-olds, programs (primarily private) have been serving children, age four, for many years. Private school programs for 4-year-olds have been in place since 1922 (Hymes, 1987). Today, many public schools across the country are implementing programs for 4-year-olds. Is this a "trend," or is it becoming the norm? What does the current research tell us about these programs?

The Demand for Public School Programs for Fours

In our changing society, there are many cultural and demographic factors which may impact on children's lives. Frost (1986) shared these predictions for the 1990s:

1. The child will experience a divorce of his/her parents.
2. The child will live with a single parent.
3. The child's mother will work outside the home.
4. The child's major activity will be watching television.
5. An increasing number of children will commit suicide.

Although somewhat depressing, these predictions are supported by extensive data. As providers of services for these "future leaders" of society, we must carefully examine what appropriate services may be made available to these young children.

Preschool intervention may be particularly effective for the most economically disadvantaged children (Zigler, 1986). Zigler further stated his belief that educators have misread the demand of parents. He advocated that parents really express a burning desire for "affordable, high-quality day care", rather than emphasis on the value of early education. It should be noted that 59% of the mothers of three- and four-year-olds are now employed outside the home. This reality may, indeed, create greater "demand" for early intervention. With this in mind, "universal" preschool might better integrate children across socioeconomic lines, and would introduce equity into early childhood programs (Zigler, 1986).

The number of 4-year-olds enrolled in early childhood development programs has almost doubled in the last ten years (Schweinhart, 1985). The Southern Association on Children Under Six (SACUS, 1986) noted that the pressure for additional program availability is an ever-increasing demand. The demand is based on:

1. Increased awareness on the part of parents and policymakers of the long-term value of early education.
2. Parents' needs for child care services.
3. The desire of non-employed mothers for their children to have access to preschool programs. (SACUS, 1986)

What Research Says About Developmentally Appropriateness

Elkind (1986), author of The Hurried Child, and noted scholar in Early Childhood Education (former President of the National Association of the Education of Young Children), asked "why is the special character of learning in early childhood being ignored by people who should know better?" Elkind further stated that educational programs, devised for school-aged children, are being applied to the education of young children. This is not considered "developmentally appropriate" practice. Because young children learn differently than older children and adults, the education provided them must be in keeping with their unique modes of learning. Elkind has coined a term-- "miseducation". He advocated that when we place young children in formal educational settings, we put them at-risk for no reason. He further noted that these risks are of at least three kinds: Motivational, intellectual, and social (Elkind, 1986). Elkind reminded us of what we already know- young children, when placed in formal academic settings are, in turn, placed under stress, and demand for adaptation. This particular adaptation is difficult for older (school-aged) children to accomplish without damaging their self-concepts, but the long-term negative effects on very young children can be devastating.

Lifelong Learning. Futrell (1987) recommended that reflection of the ideal of "lifelong learning" is necessary when examining specifically what to teach young children. Lifelong learning entails learning that will equip children with mental

agility, emotional stability (coping skills), and social cognition, necessary for functioning effectively in the future. Socialization is a primary goal of early childhood education. At the adult level, cooperation is a key-factor in working and living harmoniously in society. As many have said, today's young children will be tomorrow's leaders. They must be prepared to fill these leadership roles in our futuristic society.

The Role of State Departments in Programming for Fours

The role of State Departments of Education in preschool education is evolving, and there is no single approach to programming for 4-year-olds in public schools. "State programs reflect a diversity of educational concerns such as limited availability of federal funds for early childhood programs despite increased public interest and support, and a growing concern for children who appear to be "at risk" for school failure as they enter school" (Educational Research Service Staff Report, 1986, p. 23). The majority of public school prekindergarten programs are implemented through special legislation that establishes definitions and standards for the programs and provides limited funding. States who sponsored prekindergarten programs through special legislation during the 1985-86 school year included New York, Maryland, Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, Oklahoma, California, Ohio, Texas, Illinois, Michigan, and Massachusetts (Morado, 1986, p. 127).

Washington implemented special legislation for prekindergarten programs to begin, Fall, 1986, and Texas is the only state requiring school districts to provide compensatory prekindergarten programs (Morado, 1986).

Most state-sponsored prekindergarten programs enroll 4-year olds. Some, however, offer services for 3- and 4-year-olds. Several states report "age" as the only criterion for entrance. Other states typically specify criteria intended to target children who may be "at-risk" for school failure. Morado (1986, p.128) stated that:

Access to programs can vary greatly, depending on selective participation of school districts, efforts to ensure geographic balance across the state, and even the location of the program within the participating school district.

Some researchers found that 28 states and the District of Columbia support early childhood education through one of three funding arrangements: (1) pilot or statewide prekindergarten programs; (2) parent education programs; or (3) introduction or expansion of the Head Start program (Strother, 1987).

Approximately two-thirds of the state programs are intended to serve children "at risk" for school failure because they come from low-income families or suffer from problems of limited English proficiency or lack of readiness.

The role of state education agencies is evolving, and there is no single approach when programming for 4-year-olds.

Diversity of educational concerns are reflected by state programs. These concerns include: Limited availability of federal funds for early childhood, and growing concern for school failure as young children enter public schools. Programs for 4-year-olds may offer unique opportunities for the growth of services for young children. State departments should continue to recognize these important considerations in programming for 4-year-olds: Appropriate standards, equity and equal access, meeting community needs, and continuity and coordination of services (for all age groups).

Arkansas' Plan

Arkansas' development of 4-year-old programs began as individual initiatives rather than a state-wide effort. In 1988-89, the Little Rock School District put in place five programs for 4-year-olds within their public school system. Teachers certified for Kindergarten were employed in this program. In 1989-90, Little Rock added nine more classes for a total of 13 public school programs for fours. These programs were implemented as a part of the desegregation plan. The programs are located in schools identified as "major enhancement" schools, with the programs for 4-year-olds viewed as one of the major enhancements of a particular school. These programs also serve as early intervention for "at risk" children. The purpose is similar to Head Start's mission, in

that, all children are provided free opportunities to "get off to a better start" in formal schooling.

Public school programs for fours also began under the funding and guidance of Vocational Education through Home Economics. Several high schools in the state implemented preschool programs to serve as training sites for high school students.

Another alternative for serving 4-year-olds can be found in the form of private day care programs and Head Start programs. These programs are located on public school campuses and are often located near the kindergarten classrooms. Although these programs are not in abundance they are in existence in some of the rural areas of the state.

An unusual type of program is Arkansas' "HIPPY" program. "HIPPY", Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters, is designed to be used by parents. Parents are taught in the home as well as in a preschool setting by a paraprofessional to use an instructional kit with 4-year-olds. The paraprofessionals are trained by an authorized HIPPY trainer. Some local school district monies are used for funding of this program.

Federal funds through the preschool handicapped program are also in existence and are used to implement programs for 3- and 4-year-olds with special needs.

It is evident that many various programs for 4-year-olds exist in Arkansas. In January 1988, as an attempt to coordinate and improve efforts in serving 4-year-olds, the State Department of Education employed a coordinator. This

coordinator established an Early Childhood Commission made up of representatives from across the state. The purpose of this Commission was to develop a plan for the implementation of programs for 4-year-olds in Arkansas. The Commission's task was to make recommendations concerning: Priority sites for public school programs; pupil-teacher ratio; teacher certification; aides and volunteers; ensuring that developmentally appropriate curriculum would be in place; and assist in planning a smooth transition from pilot to wide-spread program existence.

Although legislation did not pass to provide funding for wide-spread public school programs for 4-year-olds, plans are being made for these programs. Teacher education programs across the state are currently implementing very specialized courses in their curricula to prepare for these services to be provided. Arkansas currently serves 4-year-olds in diverse ways; however, plans are being made and actions taken to implement state-wide programs for fours in public schools in the near future.

Determinants for "Quality" Programs

The National Day Care Study found that only one teacher characteristic predicts program quality and effectiveness: the amount of job-related training in early childhood education that a teacher has received.

Public school programs for 4-year-olds should be quite different from some of today's public school kindergartens. The

trend toward "developmentally appropriate practices" has obviously not reached all kindergartens. For several years, kindergartens have been criticized by early childhood specialists for their emphasis on "formal academic instruction", as well as being "watered down" first grades. Developmentally appropriateness for 4-year-olds is not synonymous with "developmentally appropriateness" for 5-year-olds.

SACUS (1986) emphasized the need for "carefully designed programs." SACUS also urged public school policymakers to recognize the need for priority in establishing "developmentally appropriate programs". These programs must:

1. Be based upon the knowledge of and response to child development research.
2. Employ only those professionally trained in early childhood to guide the growth and development of young children.
3. Focus on the special needs and characteristics of 4-year-olds and their families.

SACUS (1986) advocated that excellence in the education of 4-year-old children in the public school systems of America is an available opportunity and an obtainable goal. The priorities, however, must focus on knowledge of child growth and development. SACUS further emphasized that the achievements of such programs can be measured in the growth and development of more positive, cooperative, productive and successful human beings.

Safeguards in Establishing Quality Programs

The National Day Care Study (1979) determined the most important factors for consideration when establishing quality programs. These factors include: Group size, qualifications and training of staff, stability of care, and adult-child ratio. In addition, the National Black Child Development Institute (1987) reported ten safeguards for establishing public school programs for 4-year-olds (See Appendix A).

Changes: An Investment for the Future

There are clearly many economic benefits to investing in quality programs for 4-year-olds, particularly for disadvantaged students. Cheever and Ryder (1986) reported that the children studied in the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan were monitored and compared in life experiences over a 16-year period. Findings indicated that, at age 19, 59% of the group enrolled in the program were employed, compared to 32% who had not been enrolled. More than two thirds of the Perry Preschool group had completed high school, whereas, only 32% of the others had completed high school. Over 38% of the preschool group had continued on to college or some other form of post-secondary school, 60% demonstrated above-average functional competence, and only 31% had police records- compared to over 51% for the non-preschool group. In addition, the teen pregnancy rate was less than half of that reported by the non-preschool group.

Cheever and Ryder (1986) also suggested that a very convincing case can be made for quality programs for 4-year-olds in local schools. They advocated that most public schools already have adequately equipped facilities which meet state and local codes, and many already have well-trained staff who can provide the human resources necessary for "exemplary" early childhood programs. In addition, schools have in place appropriate procedures for hiring and supervising employees, provide benefits, and additional support necessary for successful programming. Schools also have "credibility" with their local communities, as well as access to public resources and media. Most important, public schools (only) can provide that logical progression and transition (continuity) in preschool, kindergarten, and elementary grades. This factor allows schools to consider children's long-term development. Long-term development is the most important investment a school system can make.

Epstein, Morgan, Curry, Endsley, Bradbard, and Rashid (1985) stated that:

Unless program quality is carefully defined and maintained, an early childhood program is just another place for young children to be. There is no intrinsic value in a young child's leaving home for a few hours a day to join another adult and a group of children. If an early childhood program is to promote healthy child development, research and

experience show that it must be conducted to high standards of quality by competent child development professionals who establish an environment that supports active learning by the child.

Hymes (1987) advocated that "now is the time" for public schools to provide programs for ALL 4-year-olds. He further advocated learning from past mistakes. Hymes (1987) recommended: 1) Teacher education programs providing major fields of study specifically focussing upon the young child; 2) Recognizing that trained teachers are wasted unless they have supports that free them to use their skills; 3) Class size is a key factor in program quality (16 per class- maximum); 4) Teachers should have salaries which are equal to those of other public school teachers; 5) Teachers' aides are necessary-- whether paid, or volunteer; 6) Teachers need time schedules which make it possible for them to talk frequently with parents; and 7) Teachers need principals and supervisors who respect their training, knowledge, expertise, and treat them as specialists and professionals.

There is still considerable controversy over whether public schools should offer programs for 4-year-olds. Elkind (1982) expressed fear that programs could place excessive "academic" demands on young children. Washington (1988) concluded that the coming decade challenges early childhood educators to prepare to serve larger numbers of children from diverse family backgrounds

and ethnic groups. She further stated that "The 1990s present a window of opportunity which can advance public opinion, research, theory, and practice in early education if we are prepared to address realistically the foreseeable trends" (Washington, 1988, p. 4). In conclusion, Elkind (1988) said:

Early childhood has been waiting in the wings of education for centuries. It is time for it to come on stage as a full-fledged member of the educational cast. The whole performance can only be enhanced by its audition (p. 70).

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Appendix A

National Black Child Development Institute (1987)

Safeguards: Guidelines for Establishing Programs for Fours

National Black Child Development Institute (1987)

Safeguards: Guidelines for Establishing Programs for Fours

- 1) Public school-based programs for Black, preschool-age children should incorporate an effective parent education model.
- 2) Public school-based early childhood programs should involve parents in the decisions about the curriculum and policy.
- 3) The staff should include teachers who come from the community served by the program and who are racially and ethnically representative of the children served.
- 4) Teachers in public school-based programs should be required to have specific training in preschool education and/or ongoing, inservice training provided by qualified staff.
- 5) Curriculum for preschool-age children in the public school should be culturally sensitive and appropriate to the child's age and level of development.
- 6) Public schools which house programs for very young children should meet the same health and safety standards which apply to independent preschools and center-based child care programs.
- 7) Public school-based early childhood programs should participate in federal and state programs which guarantee adequate nutrition to children.

- 8) Administrators of public school-based programs should ensure that children entering the programs have access to appropriate health care.
- 9) In assessing children of preschool age, the administrators of public school-based early childhood programs should not limit their assessment to, or base their program planning solely on, standardized tests.
- 10) Public school-based programs should be subject to a regular, external review by community members and early childhood development experts.